

Breakfast Remarks. Michael Bruinooge, President. National Voluntary
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NVOAD AND VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATIONS IN DISASTER RESPONSE

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Introduction

I am pleased and honored to speak briefly to you this morning about the volunteer community in disaster response in the United States. Dick Rennick spoke to you yesterday morning about FEAT, the Franchise Emergency Action Teams of the International Franchise Association. I also represent an association—an association of organizations whose volunteers are dedicated specifically to helping the survivors of disasters.

These organizations have banded together in what we call the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, or NVOAD.

We are in our 26th year. I have distributed some literature at your tables that describes both NVOAD and an organization in Japan which emerged following the Great Hanshin Earthquake, the NVNAD, or Nippon Volunteer Network Active in Disaster.

Description of NVOAD and Member Agencies

NVOAD's 29 member organizations include some you will certainly recognize, such as the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, and Second Harvest National Network of Food Banks. It also includes many that may be unfamiliar to you.

Interestingly, about two thirds of our member organizations have a religious base. Of these, most are connected with Christian churches. However, we also have as members one Hindu group, one Jewish organization, and one group with Buddhist roots. Our newest member is the United States Service Command, a group primarily of retired U.S. military personnel who want to dedicate their skills and resources to relieving the suffering of disaster survivors.

NVOAD's primary values can be expressed in three English words beginning with the letter "C." The first is cooperation—an attitude of mind, primarily. Our members are committed to cooperative, not competitive action. The second is communication. We pledge to share information with each other concerning our plans, programs and resources. The third is coordination. We coordinate our services to disaster survivors, so as to avoid duplication and waste, and to cover any gaps in service.

NVOAD's services to its members are almost entirely in the preparedness phase, i.e., before disaster strikes. We help our members to know and respect one another, and to share information about their resources and plans. We also offer training to State and County VOAD leaders and their member organizations. Our members, however, provide services in all phases of disaster: preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation.

What, concretely, do voluntary disaster agencies do to assist survivors? You can find them providing: hot and cold meals; shelter; emergency supplies—such as bottled water; mental health counseling; grief counseling; advocacy (i.e., referral to government and professional services); clean-up of debris; training and education—both prior to, and following, disasters; repair and reconstruction of housing; and organizational consultation to community organizations that seek to help their neighbors recover from the disaster.

Recent Trends

In the United States we have a well established structure of volunteerism in disaster relief. But two trends in recent years have presented challenges to us. Beginning with Hurricane Hugo in 1989, several large national disasters have led to a large increase in the number of voluntary organizations seeking to help disaster survivors. This has happened because the public, through its generous donations, demonstrated a strong desire to see the voluntary sector respond to disasters. We are glad to see this interest. But the increase in organizational response has meant that State and Federal authorities have had to interact with more partners, complicating their work. And some of these groups have had a very independent spirit, combined with ignorance and inexperience. This has made cooperation and coordination more difficult. We have been glad to see more groups join NVOAD and our affiliate State and local VOADs, and see this as an opportunity to educate them about how to work within a collaborative system. So the first trend is an expanded voluntary sector interest in disaster response.

The second trend is one toward *localism*. We have seen a growth in the number of local, i.e., neighborhood, city and county voluntary organizations, which want to become involved in disaster response. Many "community-based organizations," whose primary mission is to address an ongoing need of local society (for example, aid to the elderly, telephone counseling, and adoption services), have shown an interest in disaster readiness and response. This is because these very organizations addressed disaster-related issues following the Northridge Earthquake in southern California, and Hurricane Andrew in southern Florida—and now want to be better prepared for future disasters. As a consequence, our association is now getting involved in organizing and coordinating numerous new *local* (or "sub-state") VOADs. One example is the "Emergency Network of Los Angeles," which was formed in 1994 with active assistance from the office of the mayor of Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, we are all aware of the surge of interest in volunteerism in Japan following the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995. As volunteers sought to involve themselves in the recovery, the media reported extensively on these individuals' experience in seeking to make a contribution. A national discussion ensued over the place of volunteerism in Japanese society. Out of the earthquake experience we in NVOAD came to know a group of individuals in Japan who were seeking to build a network of volunteer-based disaster response organizations like ours. So in time, we developed a fraternal relationship with the Nippon Volunteer Network Active in Disaster, concerning whom I have already shared a handout with you. NVNAD is based in the city of Nishinomiya, in Hyogo Prefecture. Under NVNAD's sponsorship, I had the privilege last February, with four other Americans, of visiting Japan to participate in seminars and symposia in Tokyo, Osaka and Nishinomiya. The topic was the administration of volunteer organizations in disaster response, and particularly, the relationship between such organizations and governmental bodies. Among our U.S. contingent was a representative of the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Government - Voluntary Organization Relationship in the U.S.

The relationship between government and volunteer-based organizations in the United States is generally good. And it has gotten even better at the national and state levels recently, due to the strong desire for collaboration expressed by President Clinton, FEMA Director James Lee Witt, and directors of State emergency management agencies.

At the federal level, FEMA has assigned the director of its Human Services Division to be its liaison with voluntary agencies. Through this officer, NVOAD and FEMA have engaged in joint planning activities. One notable achievement is the cooperative development of a program for managing donated goods and services. Throughout the United States various FEMA staff members are assigned to serve as liaisons to voluntary organizations. And on the State level, our VOAD affiliates form relationships with Emergency Management Agencies. Increasingly, State response plans include

a place for a VOAD representative to serve in the Emergency Operations Center during a disaster operation.

For government, the voluntary sector is both a challenge and an opportunity. It is, of course, easy to see the challenge side—the risks and liabilities. A volunteer is usually not a highly trained disaster professional. The volunteer also, by and large, is not as dependable as the professional. He or she chooses to serve, which implies that at times—due to schedule conflict or other priorities—he or she may also choose not to serve. A well-meaning but somewhat ignorant part of the voluntary sector sometimes causes a "disaster within a disaster" by getting in the way of trained emergency response personnel or by donating unwanted and unneeded materials. There is reason, then, why government professionals sometimes view volunteers with caution.

But I would like to stress the opportunity side. There are clearly limits to the government's resources—and the voluntary sector can supplement these by bringing people and materials to the battle. Frequently, this includes specialized skills and equipment, even if it is for the short-term. Volunteers bring energy. They bring spirit. They bring willingness to work long hours. They bring an instinctive and genuine compassion that the disaster victim readily responds to and appreciates. And they bring a presence that often remains for the long-term recovery of victims, long after the media and most government personnel have departed.

Government and the public, for their part, has a right to demand the best possible performance of voluntary agencies. If the presence of individual volunteers cannot be guaranteed, at least the organizations that channel their services must follow through on *their* commitments to serve. We in NVOAD are committed to a high standard of excellence for our members, expecting each to fill a needed niche for services, and to never make promises they can't fulfill.

Mitigation and VOAD Members

Finally, let me mention one specific arena in which voluntary agencies in the United States are seeking to provide better service. That is in *mitigation*. FEMA Director Witt has challenged the country with the need for better preparation so that the costs of response and recovery are reduced. Our NVOAD member organizations are gearing up to do their part in mitigation as well. The American Red Cross recently announced a special mitigation initiative, for example. The Salvation Army has also been strengthening its plans in this area.

What can voluntary agencies do with regard to mitigation? At least two things. One, they can be very helpful in disseminating information on mitigation to the community. An educational role is one that is comfortable to them. They have a pipeline, a ready distribution network, not only to their volunteers, but to their donors, their financial supporters, and frequently, to policy-makers as well. Second, voluntary agencies have a pool of labor that is well suited to working in disaster-vulnerable communities to retrofit older and poor neighborhoods so that the poor—who are the target population of many agencies—are not as vulnerable. If they can meet the challenges of funding for the expenses of this sort of activity there is no reason why their contribution cannot have a sizable impact.

Mr Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to share with you and all attenders of this symposium some information about the voluntary community and how it is responding to earthquakes and other disasters.

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